Biology: my old girlfriend

We animals are influenced by experience; we learn, sometimes. I was shacked up with biology for almost twenty years. That was some experience.

We weren't really well suited, me and biology, so what brought us together? Partly it was that as a child I loved animals; I spent happy years roaming the hills and deserts and shores of southern California, chasing life, catching hapless animals that came within my grasp. It was bio*phily* at first sight. The other part was a marriage between me and academe, arranged early by my father and society, who put me into university. But there was no place for loving animals, rather I was obliged to study them. Enter bio*logy*.

The attraction of biological research for me was primarily physical. As a student casting about for a niche, the relation of investigator to subject matter was crucial; the clear liquid vials of biochemistry held no appeal (an early sign of my failure to bond with the logists). I loved the manipulation of carefully exposing microscopic muscles and nerves (all of life is beautiful when you really look at it). Such physicality is a common element of my old life with biology and my new one with sculpture, the manipulation of a natural material (rat embryo or cedar log) toward a desired end.

Why did I remain so long in a flawed relationship? It was my own biology that did it, my male-animal competitiveness, a strong need to do well and to be seen to do well. We humans, still endowed with that primary animal drive to reproduce, have abstracted the characteristics deemed sexy to such things as fancy cars, large bank accounts and Nobel prizes. As a young male in academic science, I wanted to be judged appealing within that system's values, and so worked hard to clear the hurdles it presented: graduate from university, get into a desirable graduate school, complete courses, pass qualifying exams, complete thesis, present seminars, get good postdoctoral position, get fellowships, present more seminars, do well, be liked, get job, get grants, get students, get postdocs, get tenure.

I was engrossed by the race, breathless, surrounded by others equally engrossed. Only when the hurdles ahead started to bore me (chairman, dean, president) did I stop to ask if I really wanted to run. It took me so long to ask this primary question. I was the captive of male hormones. Ironically, I'm caught again. I still want to be seen to do well, to have society like my art. I want my new 'girlfriend' to love me. It's just sex. Though we identify our animal traits we do not rise above them!

Within this domain of male competitiveness is the matter of posturing. Any male worth his sperm knows about puffing up to look as big and strong as possible. As a male child I learned this. So too within the society of current biology it is important to deliver manuscript/seminar/grant application with strength and conviction, even if one does not feel it. Biology is not the province of men only, but many of its practices are dictated by male competitiveness. (Some larger labs are reminiscent of the harems of bull elephant seals.)

This expectation of public performance is demanding. One has to learn to stand before a room of peers and with confidence present information in a way that makes it seem clear and interesting, even if it is not. Careers rise and fall, jobs are lost and won on the basis of such performance. Lecturing to a hall of hot-shit medical students can be terrifying to the inept and the unprepared. This was all part of the affair (a little S&M?) and I was permanently moulded by such trials.

Now I confidently present my work to anyone. I like my work and myself, and if they don't it's OK; my self-esteem does not stand or fall with the opinion of any one person. Because I'm confident, they're more inclined to like me and my work. I was tempered in the fires of science.

With all this competing I learned how to work hard. That trait serves me still; I get up each day and sculpt, whether I feel like it or not. Some others are very creative but have never learned how to work, and they do not accomplish much. It is through the doing that one goes forward, in whatever domain.

One trait I disliked in my scientific mistress was her constant harping on right and wrong. She was so darn critical; am I right, am I sure I'm right, will I sign my name to it. This was a big headache. Art is more tolerant; there is no right and no wrong. Worse, biology expected me to pass judgement on others, too. As I advanced I was asked to write letters about students, review manuscripts, assess grant applications, choose among job applicants and judge merit for tenure. I was obliged to make judgements that profoundly affected other peoples' lives. It's enough for me to direct my own life, I don't want such influence over others.

In the end I had to get out, though with no clear vision of where I was going. Out here the animals were waiting, and unexpectedly I was given sculpture. Here I belong. I would never have found my place had I not let go and jumped.

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